

Kent County Courthouse Public Art Selection Panel Meeting

Final Selection

Monday, January 22, 2007

Rhode Island State Council on the Arts Offices

One Capital Hill, Third Floor

Providence, RI

Introductions & Updates from Cristina:

The Selection Panel met to resolve an impasse regarding selection of artwork for the Kent County Courthouse. The one piece that the entire panel agreed upon was Bill Fontana's proposal for a sound installation. With debate about the other three proposals ongoing, in May 2006 Cristina DiChiera asked the RISCA Council to approve the Fontana proposal because the building was rapidly approaching completion. The Council did not approve the Fontana piece during that meeting. They requested additional information to assure that Mr. Fontana would provide an enduring installation that would be well accepted. Ms. DiChiera then requested permission from the Council to offer two of the artist finalists small additional stipends to revise their initial proposals in order to move the selection process past a current panel impasse. The Council agreed. The January 22 meeting was held in order for the panel to revisit two original proposals and review two revised proposals.

Bill Fontana's proposal:

Site: The procession from the garage to the courthouse.

Proposal: Bill Fontana proposes mounting 9 speakers along the walkway, which would play Rhode Island birdsongs. These recordings would be crafted by Mr. Fontana to play in cycles and with pauses rather than continuously, as well as varying the recordings according to the season.

One panelist wondered if there would be some sort of visual support for the piece - such as a plaque or informative sign explaining the artist's concept and how he made his recordings of native birds. The panel acknowledged that Mr. Fontana's initial budget was based on the assumption that conduit could be laid before concrete was poured and landscaping was completed at the site. Now that that construction work has been completed, they wondered how much the budget would increase due to additional site preparation work. Ms. DiChiera explained that she had not asked Bill Fontana or Fernanda D'Agostino to provide reworked figures for their projects, but all of the artists had expressed willingness to scale back their pieces to meet budget limitations. One panelist wondered if it was necessary to pull up landscaping for conduit, and if it could be run up the I-beams. Ms. DiChiera explained that the Project Manager wanted the wires to be buried, but these issues would all be revisited if the work was selected. The panel reiterated their decision to commission Mr. Fontana's proposal for a sound installation along the walkway, but not his proposal for the front stairwell. Some panelists expressed

concern about the exterior installation attracting birds and creating a maintenance problem. Ms. DiChiera said she had asked Mr. Fontana about the possibility of his installation attracting birds, due to previous panel comments, and he said he has done sound installations all over the world and that has never been a problem. No one was concerned about the technical aspects of the piece (the changing of audio seasonally, etc.) because there are maintenance plans and warranties for the equipment which will be adequate.

Ms. DiChiera recapped the panel's sentiments from the last meeting as "everyone felt positively about the project, though no one felt that it was the most perfect piece possible." The panel responded that this was not a correct recording of their last response to the work. They felt that their reaction to the piece had actually been more positive than that. One panelist pointed out that Mr. Fontana's piece, which was relatively low in price, would be a welcome selection in conjunction with another piece. Another panelist felt that this piece was appropriate for the location because the small wetland environment at the Courthouse would be celebrated through the local bird sounds.

One panelist pointed out that, at one point, those sounds would have been naturally occurring there and it was nice to have them returned, but they were concerned as to whether bird sounds qualified as "art." They wondered if the same effect could have been designed by a sound engineer. Ms. DiChiera pointed out that Mr. Fontana has become an internationally recognized sound artist, with works all

over the world, which could be a consideration in understanding the artistic integrity of the work. One panelist noted that Mr. Fontana's initial presentation was perhaps the most professional and intensive of all of the finalists - he had worked with the architects, engineers and project managers in honing his proposal.

Ms. DiChiera read the panel's original goals for the piece as stated in the RFP: 1. The Courthouse can be a stressful place, and the piece should provide a sense of calm for visitors. 2. The panel should not shy away from new media. 3. Issues of the Judiciary should be addressed such as transparency, justice, fairness. She inquired whether the Fontana piece met these criteria. The panel felt that the Fontana piece would enhance the public experience of visiting the courthouse; that the final product would be something uniquely Rhode Island; that the proposal satisfied the RFP and would be appropriate for the location.

Michael Davis's revised proposal:

Site: In front of the reflecting pool near the entrance to the Courthouse.

Proposal: A large-scale bronze and glass sculpture of the figure of justice. Mr. Davis's primary revisions to his proposal included adding more detail to the face and figure of the sculpture and moving it in front of the reflecting pool rather inside it.

The panel expressed concern that Mr. Davis's budget had gone up in

his revision. Ms. DiChiera stated that she had not given the artists budget limits for their re-submissions, but that she had no doubt that Mr. Davis could scale down to whatever budget the panel felt was necessary. He had expressed his willingness to adjust his budget to accommodate a second commission. He could come down in budget to \$270,000 by reducing the size of the sculpture, for example. Mr. Davis had explained that he couldn't definitively nail down his budget figures because he wouldn't know what installation problems might arise until he broke ground. Some panelists were happy with the new location for the statue, preferring it to the original placement inside the pool. Other panelists felt that the piece was stronger when it was sited in the reflecting pool—outside of the pool it was “just a statue.” Ms. DiChiera explained that Mr. Davis wanted the panel to know that he saw the glass element of the sculpture as relating to the glass of the building, reflecting the idea of judicial transparency as well as the modern building design. He felt that the traditional bronze sculpture contrasted and complimented that modern glass element.

One panelist expressed concern that, as most people enter via the walkway, they would not see the sculpture very well. Another pointed out that you would see the sculpture from the road and that there is a circular drop off driveway near it. Visitors to the Courthouse would see the back of the sculpture from inside the building.

Ms. DiChiera mentioned that Mr. Davis had not put in a lighting budget for the sculpture and would determine if lighting was necessary and feasible later. The architect panel member explained

that installing lighting for the sculpture would not be a problem.

One panelist said they felt the piece was very accessible to a wide range of visitors. Another panelist said that they felt it was a classic, traditional, beautiful piece, and made sense with the architecture of the building, but felt that it was also “expected,” and something that the people who worked in the building would like at first, but then stop noticing. They felt that the piece is so much a part of the current zeitgeist of judicial imagery, and when returning to the goals of the RFP, this panelist felt that this piece didn’t provide anything new or different, but was rather very traditional, though well done and beautiful. One panelist mentioned that it did meet the goals of the RFP that referred to issues of justice and equality. Some panelists felt that it would make a strong statement in the front of the building while others felt that it was not an exciting proposal.

Paul Housberg’s Revised Proposal:

Site: The elevator lobbies of each floor

Proposal: Four glass panel installations in different color schemes reflecting the seasons.

Mr. Housberg made framed samples of the glass that would be used in the installation and instructed that they should be viewed in front of a window. He also provided photo-shop renderings of the panels depicted in their proposed location. The panel left the room to view the glass samples in front of natural light and returned to discuss the

differences between his initial proposal and the revision.

The panel expressed that they had been very excited about Mr. Housberg's portfolio initially, and were disappointed with his original project proposal because it was so different from the other work he had done. The panel was immediately enthusiastic about this proposal. They discussed the dimensions of each piece and how they would fit in front of the windows. There was mention of whether they would obstruct the view through the glass or not. One panelist stated that if they had to choose between the bronze sculpture and the glass installation piece they would choose this without question because it was more visually pleasurable and compelling to interact with. It would be dynamic, changing as the outside light changes - as opposed to the static, stylized Scales of Justice. Other panelists expressed that Housberg's proposal evoked interaction and response, even eliciting the urge to go up and touch the panels—which would be possible, as the piece is not fragile. There was some question about how the panes were situated in relation to the window glass, the ceiling and the elevators. Ms. DiChiera explained that Mr. Housberg had sited the pieces to allow room between the panels and the elevators in compliance with ADA standards. One panelist pointed out that the potential flexibility of the placement of the glass frames could be useful if the piece was selected. The panel appreciated the easy maintenance of the piece, all that would be needed is glass cleaner. Ms. DiChiera pointed out that lighting for nighttime was budgeted in the proposal, but might

not be necessary — and the panel felt that it was probably not necessary, as the natural and building light would be adequate. Some concern was expressed about the strength of the frame that would hold the glass panels, which would be extremely heavy. They agreed, however, that that would easily be addressed by the artist working with the architects. One panelist expressed that Mr. Housberg's revised proposal was far more successful than his initial proposal at integrating within the space and the architecture of the building.

Ms. DiChiera relayed Mr. Housberg's explanation of some of his choices in the revised proposal. His goal was to provide a calming environment for visitors to the building and to connect the artwork on the interior to the exterior wetlands and refer to the seasonal changes, making the piece dynamic and reassuring to the court visitors and workers.

The panel was enthusiastic about creating a plaque or sign that would tie the Fontana and Housberg pieces together. They wondered where these signs would be placed and how they would be worded and designed. They hoped this would create a connection between the two, addressing the shared themes of the change of seasons and reference to the wetlands.

Fernanda D'Agostina's Proposal:

Site: The wall/s on the outside of the elevator lobbies.

Proposal: One projection of images relating to themes of justice,

projected onto screens in the shape of the scales of justice or four screened glass installations of images relaying to American justice in the shape of the scales of justice

Ms. DiChiera recapped that some of the panelists had felt that Ms. D'Agostino's justification for her piece had been very strong, though one panelist disagreed on that point. The panel was also concerned about location issues — the piece could only be located on the upper floors, not on the ground floor where many people enter, therefore the single projection would only be viewed by some. One of the panelists who had previously been the most in favor of the D'Agostino proposal felt that it was still the strongest in terms of addressing the themes of justice, but felt concern about the possibility of the video piece being seen by people only on one floor. Ms. DiChiera explained the different budget projections for the piece: either a lower budget with video projections on one floor only, or the higher budget with video projections on one floor and still images screened onto glass panels on the other floors. The panel was less enthusiastic about the proposal for screened glass installations on the other floors. There was concern about the maintenance of the projection equipment and screens, and questions of whether the piece would stay in good working order in the long term. They also felt that this piece wasn't suited to the passerby, as it required consideration and reflection to really make sense of it and absorb the content; whereas the Housberg glass installation and the Fontana sound piece could be brought much more easily into the audience's

experience. The panel felt that the video would require more work for an audience that might be caught up in worrying about their court appointments, etc. There was concern that the video piece might feel outdated in 10 years time. One panelist said they felt this piece would be very strong in a gallery or a museum where it could be reflected on, but didn't feel it would be as effective day-in-day-out in a working courtroom. They felt it would work as a traveling/rotating exhibit moved to different courthouses, but not as a fixed long term piece. Some panelists appreciated the social content of the piece, but didn't feel that it was as successful as an art object.

Panel Decision: Selection of the Housberg and Fontana pieces.

The panel voted in favor of ruling out all proposals except for Housberg's and Fontana's. The panel liked the fact that Housberg was a local artist. They expressed the desire to have information on display about both the sound and glass pieces, explaining the themes of nature, seasonality and local landscape, and their thematic connection to each other. They wanted guests to the courthouse to have access to more information on those subjects if they desired. The panel agreed that they would like to have both the glass and the sound piece installed. They decided to ask Paul Housberg to come up with his own proposal for how to reduce his budget to allow for the Fontana piece within the overall budget. Both artists will be asked to provide updated itemized budgets for their projects in order to make both projects work within the overall budget. The panel

voted unanimously to select Paul Housberg and Bill Fontana to install their pieces in the Kent County Courthouse, with the caveat that they will go back and rework their budgets and revise their proposals as necessary to make both pieces work within the overall budget and to accommodate information signs or plaques.